# Hey Diddle Diddle, Fiddling With History

## In 'King' and 'Ruby and Oswald,' Real-Life Figures Become Comic-Strip Cutouts

*By Tom Shales*

Dishes are running away with spoons again and the little dogs still laugh. In the week ahead, television networks once more will be having their merry and nefarious ways with recent reality, turning figures both revered and reviled into the comic-strip cutouts of pop melodrama and further endangering the concept of truth as a cultural value.

Both "King," a three-part biography of Martin Luther King Jr. which begins Sunday night on NBC, and "Ruby and Oswald," a three-hour drama special on CBS tonight, intercut actual newsreel footage with questionable speculative reenactments and thereby tell viewers that on television, fantasy and reality should be regarded as equals.

"King," which is really Hollywood liberal Abby Mann's six-hour love letter to himself, at least manages to pack some dramatic wallop, however parasitically generated, as it traces the history of the civil rights movement from the early '50s onward. In the course of this, however, there are such dubious injections of authenticity as having Ramsey Clark and Tony Bennett play themselves.

You didn't know Tony Bennett had a role in the civil rights movement? Why, he was nothing less than a guest star. When you're stretching the truth, you might as well pull with all your might.

The best protection against a program like "Ruby and Oswald," on Channel 9 at 8 o'clock tonight, may be its own absolute lack of dramatic tension; it ploddingly attempts to depict nearly every waking moment of Lee Harvey Oswald, the accused assassin of President Kennedy, and Jack Ruby, the assassin of Lee Harvey Oswald, during four days in Dallas in 1963.

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*"Ruby and Oswald": Frederic Forrest top, as Lee Harvey Oswald and Michael Lerner as Jack Ruby.*

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AIR, From B1

Long before the actor impersonating Ruby has taken his third morning dip in the family pool, viwers are left to wonder why on earth CBS has chosen to bring this painful history up again. Certainly not for any apparent worthwhile purpose. The only points the program makes—both of them wildly debatable—are that Ruby was a lovable bumbling patriot, that of a "Marty" with a gun, and that the Warren Commission report was positively the last word on the assassination.

No one wants to be put in the position of discouraging controversial programming on televison, but this is the cheapest kind of controversy. In fact "Ruby and Oswald" skirts the crucial, nagging unanswered questions about the JFK tragedy, while at the same time pandering to our emotional vulnerabilities with actual newsreel footage of President and Mrs. Kennedy as they near Dallas and calamity.

By using these still-heartbreaking and Hutch" [illegible]el, "Ruby and Oswald" stoops low in the name of show-biz expediency.

The creators of this travesty make giant claims for its credibility. Director Mel Stuart, who already profited from the Kennedy assassination with a documentary called "Four Days in November" in 1965 (the original title for "Ruby and Oswald" was "Four Days in Dallas"), claims that a committee of representatives from CBS News and "network executives" reviewed his film to make certain its details were authentic.

"We had nothing whatsoever to do with 'Ruby and Oswald,'" a CBS News spokesman countered yesterday. "And we will have nothing to do with any of these docu-dramas. We were never asked to review this show and we never would."

When CBS News President Richard Salant heard of Stuart's statement, he wrote Stuart objecting to it and Stuart wired back that he never made the remark. But about 65 TV critics and editors heard him make the remark at a late afternoon press conference film, in a Los Angeles hotel on Friday, Jan. 13.

Company president Alan Landsburg said yesterday from Hollywood that it was never his understanding that CBS News would look at the show but that it would be, and was, reviewed by a "committee" whose composition he was "not privy" to.

"I think it's grossly unfair to ask our company to comment on what CBS did," Landsburg said, re-emphasizing that the "accuracy of all details" in the program has been "checked in every respect."

Stuart also said the Warren Commission report was his "primary" source for the film. A Gallup Poll in December 1976 showed that 80 percent of the American people do not believe the report's conclusion that Oswald acted alone in the killing of the president, however.

So when the time comes for the actual shooting in "Ruby and Oswald," Stuart gingerly cops out. The screen goes into a blurred freeze-frame and we hear three shots fired. The actor playing Oswald—a fellow who looks tein diet—is not shown firing or holding a gun.

"I wasn't there," says Stuart, in defense of this curious evasion. "No one was in that room. I would have to go by circumstantial evidence and that would be wrong."

Stuart concedes that the words put in Ruby's mouth are "a synthesis of what he said in those days" and that he took "a certain dramatic freedom" in the depiction. Yet he maintains that Oswald's dialogue, at least during the lengthy interrogation scenes, is "all verbatim."

That's a particularly inflammatory contention in the eyes of Jeff Goldberg of the Washington-based Assassination Information Bureau. Goldberg says that no transcripts of recordings of the Oswald interrogations were made by the Dallas Police Department.

The Dallas police, widely criticized for their handling of Oswald, come out smelling like roses in the screenplay by John and Michael McGreevey. Stuart says proudly that the Dallas police department "read and ap- [illegible] and that he had their "complete cooperation" in filming at Dallas locations. Naturally.

Goldberg saw the program in advance over the objections of CBS. "It's the Warren Commission report set to words and music," he complains. "It is not good drama and it is not good history."

But "Ruby and Oswald" is hardly the first case of selective speculation by TV entertainment producers in the pursuit of almighty Nielsens. The old argument that this technique seriously impairs the public's ability to differentiate between fact and fiction seems to have fallen on a nation—and a nation's capital—of deaf ears. There may be no point in repeating it again.

And yet there must be some way to defend ourselves against these trivializing and distorting intrusions into the past. ABC's "Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald" turned the assassination of President Kennedy into a game show. CBS' "Ruby and Oswald" turns it into a cop show. The effect is as tasteless and insensitive as if they were using the same material for a dirty joke.

"Ruby and Oswald" was produced [illegible] Productions, the company whose previous network offerings this season include tales of rampaging ants on ABC ("It Happened at Lakewood Manor") and marauding spiders on CBS ("Tarantus—The Deadly Cargo"). Perhaps in the assassination of President Kennedy the company saw the stuff of another exploitable thriller. The fact that the program is dramatically a crater isn't much comfort; millions of people are bound to see it anyway, even if it scores low in the ratings.

The irony is that during the actual four days in November, television brought the agonizing reality of the Kennedy assassination into the national living room with an immediacy that made it a part of every viewer's memory and experience, probably forever. In the ensuing years, however, TV producers have ransacked even history made on television for material the way they ravage comic strips, old B-movies and cheap novels.

And so television which has been accused of desensitizing us to violence and desensitizing us to tragedy, now seems to have come full circle. Television is desensitizing us to television.